



Education

Background

This session, Senate Democrats took a new approach to education, creating one education “supercommittee” to look at early learning, K-12 and higher education issues. Learning is an ongoing process, and we are dedicated to making sure Washington offers world-class educational opportunities no matter where one is in the learning continuum.

Solution

We worked for fair compensation for school employees and ample resources so that every student can achieve academic success. Senate Democrats were proud to craft a budget that makes a big investment in our public education system. The 2005-07 operating budget represents a 9.3 percent increase in K-12 education funding over the previous biennium.

Session Victories

Fund I-732 and I-728

It was a top priority for Senate Democrats to fund both Initiative 728, which calls for lowered class size, and Initiative 732, which provides for cost-of-living increases for school employees. This was what the people of Washington asked for via initiative, and it was important to us this year to fulfill that promise, which had been suspended for two years.

Start early

House Bill 1152 establishes an early learning council in the Governor’s Office to provide parents better, more detailed information on quality child care options in our state. The council will produce a voluntary quality-based rating system based on such factors as child-to-staff ratio, group size, curriculum, learning environment and staff training.

Make every dollar count

Senate Bill 5441 calls for a comprehensive review of the state’s early learning, K-12 and higher education system to ensure we’re spending every dollar efficiently and meeting the needs of every student in the state, wherever they are in the learning continuum. The budget includes \$1.7 million for this purpose.

Unfortunately, Senate Republicans once again were able to block a proposal to allow for a simple majority of voters to approve levies and bonds.

We were able to restore some of the levy equalization funds cut by Republicans last year. This will give some help to property-poor school districts.

Create a fair testing system

Beginning with the class of 2008, Washington students will be required to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) to graduate from high school. This test is an important measure of whether students have attained the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. However, not every student does well on a pencil-and-paper test, and we wanted to recognize that by providing for equally rigorous alternative assessments if a student has failed the WASL twice. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction has money in the budget to develop alternative assessments. However, the issue of implementing alternative assessments will be revisited next year.

Promote safe schools

Students learn best when they are in a healthy learning environment. This session, we took several steps to promote safe classrooms.

SB 5552 makes sure that school districts are aware of any instances of sexual misconduct in a potential employee's history if that employee is coming from out of state. It adds on to a package of bills approved in 2004 that crack down on teachers and coaches who sexually abuse students. And Senate Democrats helped craft a measure that establishes a graduated system for disciplining teachers caught viewing sexually explicit materials on school grounds.

We also secured \$40,000 in the operating budget to create a campaign that will teach parents and children about staying safe while using the Internet. This effort will help students both in the classroom and at home.

Improve efficiency

We are making a commitment at the state level to improve efficiency and accountability with clear lines of authority when it comes to making public education decisions. SB 5732 reconstitutes the roles of the State Board of Education and the Professional Educator Standards Board, and eliminates the A+ Commission.

Make education work for every student

Every student deserves a world-class education, regardless of learning challenges. The budget includes \$700,000 so teachers have the tools to help students with dyslexia, dysgraphia and other language disabilities.

The budget also earmarks an additional \$48 per student for special education, and enhances the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), which gives a boost to struggling students. Further, funding for the program is now based on poverty rather than test scores. This is a more stable way of providing funds – school districts no longer will lose money when test scores improve.

Senate Democrats fought successfully to retain the Readiness to Learn program in the budget. Both the House and the governor proposed eliminating this important program, which helps prepare young children for school.

Skills centers offer career and technical programs that open up a variety of career paths to students. The budget includes \$1.2 million in incentive grants for school districts to maintain or increase the number of students participating in skills center instructional programs. These grants will help offset the funding lost to districts when students choose to enroll in skills centers.

Ensure teacher quality

This session we looked at ways to enhance teacher quality even more in our state. SB 5664 helps provide teachers with instructional strategies for students with dyslexia and other language learning disabilities. SB 5983 strengthens Washington's teacher certification rules. HB 1893 calls for the development of endorsement requirements for teachers of hearing-impaired students.

Build better facilities

The capital budget increases the number of square feet per student and the dollars per square foot for eligible school construction projects. It offers a record \$590 million for school construction for the 05-07 biennium. This is a nearly 40 percent increase for school construction. More money means bigger, better-constructed buildings that will benefit our children and our teachers.